UNITED
NATIONS

A

General Assembly

Distr.
GENERAL

A/50/855
22 December 1995

ORIGINAL: ENGLISH

Fiftieth session
Agenda item 12

REPORT OF THE ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COUNCIL

Review and assessment of efforts to restructure the regional dimension of United Nations economic and social activities

Note by the Secretary-General

The Secretary-General has the honour to submit to the General Assembly his comments on the report of the Joint Inspection Unit entitled "Review and assessment of efforts to restructure the regional dimension of United Nations economic and social activities" (A/49/423, annex-JIU/REP/94/6).

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I. INTRODUCTION

1. The report of the Joint Inspection Unit (JIU) entitled "Review and assessment of efforts to restructure the regional dimension of United Nations economic and social activities" is a further study by JIU related to the implementation of General Assembly resolution 32/197 of 20 December 1977, on restructuring of the economic and social sectors of the United Nations, as well as of a number of subsequent resolutions adopted by the Assembly and other legislative bodies on this subject. The report is intended as a continuation of the ongoing debates on restructuring and revitalization of the United Nations economic and social sectors and should be considered in conjunction with parallel efforts for strengthening the position of regional commissions as the main centres at the regional level for economic and social development, and the restructuring of the Secretariat undertaken by the Secretary-General in recent years.

2. The Secretary-General welcomes this initiative of JIU, which endeavours both to address the future role and activities of the regional commissions and to highlight the desirable division of responsibilities among the respective organizational entities of the United Nations, current problems in carrying forward decentralization and coordination, as well as issues of programme and administrative management. He regards the Inspector's report as a useful contribution to gaining further insight into the way in which the regional commissions are realizing their multidisciplinary potential in response to the development needs of Member States, and to the consideration of measures for action by Member States and the United Nations that could give further impetus to the restructuring process.

3. The present comments should be read in conjunction with the Secretary-General's report on the restructuring of the United Nations Secretariat that was submitted to the General Assembly at its forty-ninth session (A/49/336, sect. III.B).

4. Bearing the above in mind, the Secretary-General wishes to provide the following comments on the report in general and on the recommendations of the JIU, in particular.

II. GENERAL COMMENTS

5. The Secretary-General regards the report as a valuable contribution to the discussions on restructuring the economic and social sectors of the United Nations and to making the work of the regional commissions more effective and efficient. It addresses the issue of restructuring the Secretariat from the perspective of decentralization of certain activities to the regional level. In this regard, it should be recalled that the questions of decentralization and strengthening of the regional commissions have been discussed extensively over the years, as recognized in the Inspector's report. Indeed, one of the contributions of the present study is to provide a synopsis of previous JIU reports on decentralization, field representation and others and a synopsis of various actions taken over the years relevant to decentralization.

6. As was stressed by the Secretary-General in his comments on previous JIU reports on the subject, the purpose of any decentralization measures should be to increase efficiency and effectiveness in the delivery of programmes. Decentralization can further these objectives by bringing services closer to their beneficiaries, thereby ensuring fast, cost-effective and knowledgeable responses to problems. However, decentralization alone is not sufficient to achieve improved delivery. In particular, the danger of dispersal of activities and of bringing about fragmentation of resources and functions has to be avoided. Therefore, it is important to base decisions on decentralizing specific activities on a careful review of the specific needs to be met and the nature of the services required, the volume of resources available or potentially available, the capabilities of the organizational entities to which the responsibilities are to be devolved, as well as considerations of global consistency. In other words, decentralization of functions, like other management actions, should be carefully assessed and designed. In that regard, the Secretary-General shares the view of the Inspector concerning the need to enhance the Secretariat's capacity for strategic analysis and planning on the above issues. Similarly, the Secretary-General agrees with the emphasis placed by the Inspector on the concept of comparative advantage in improving the division of labour between the regional commissions and other Secretariat entities and on the need for the regional commissions to concentrate their resources increasingly on priority areas where they could make a unique and significant contribution.

III. COMMENTS ON RECOMMENDATIONS

RECOMMENDATION 1. Member States may wish (a) to reaffirm their conviction of the urgent need to give further impetus to the slowed-down process of restructuring and revitalization of the economic and social sectors of the United Nations; and (b) to give the Secretary-General more specific guidance for restructuring the economic and social parts of its Secretariat. They may also wish to take more coordinated positions in the legislative bodies of United Nations system organizations on such issues as roles and programmes of the respective economic and social bodies as well as on restructuring and decentralization.

RECOMMENDATION 2. Member States may wish to give careful consideration to establishing a strategic analysis and strategic planning facility in the United Nations Secretariat to supply the Secretary-General with the necessary substantive input into his strategic thinking and decision-making process. This facility should not replace the substantive technical thinking and planning that other departments are providing, but concentrate on general strategic organizational and management aspects from the overall perspective of the United Nations.

RECOMMENDATION 3. In accordance with the demand of the General Assembly to establish a transparent and effective system of accountability and responsibility in the United Nations Secretariat and in the light of failures over the last several years to make substantial progress in this important area, the Inspector believes it is critical to designate a competent senior official

with extensive managerial experience, who will be a focal point and held accountable for the firm implementation of the current restructuring process.

RECOMMENDATION 4. The Secretary-General is requested to prepare as soon as possible a specific report which, inter alia, should: (a) clearly describe functions and responsibilities of the various United Nations entities operating in the economic and social fields; (b) contain a substantive analysis as to their complementarity; (c) describe mechanisms for coordinating their activities; and (d) contain the Secretary-General's ideas concerning the restructuring measures he intends to propose in the short and medium terms.

RECOMMENDATION 5. The activities of the commissions in regional cooperation should take into account the importance of the work of other United Nations regional agencies as well as that of global organizations, (e.g. multilateral financial institutions), bilateral donors, and of non-governmental organizations active in the same or adjacent areas. The regional commissions should make an inventory of these organizations together with an analysis of their areas of competence and programmes of work in order (a) to determine the areas where the regional commissions can be most effective; (b) to establish closer cooperation with them; and (c) to ensure complementarity of action.

RECOMMENDATION 6. Within the context of implementation of General Assembly resolution 46/235 and Economic and Social Council resolution 1992/43, the Secretary-General is requested to undertake discussions with the executive heads of the United Nations funding agencies on the most rational use and financing of the regional commissions' operational capacity. Greater involvement of the regional commissions as executing agencies of regional and subregional projects, and national projects with specific regional focus, financed by these agencies should be seriously considered.

RECOMMENDATION 7. Member States, through their representatives in the legislative bodies of organizations of the United Nations system, may wish to accord the necessary support to the Secretary-General's initiatives aimed at strengthening the coordinating and team leadership role of the regional commissions.

7. It should be noted that as part of his overall efforts at revitalization and restructuring in the economic and social fields, the Secretary-General has taken a number of steps that are in line with the main thrust of the recommendations contained in the report. In this regard, the Secretary-General has been guided by the provisions of General Assembly resolution 47/212 B, which stressed that the further restructuring should entail the decentralization of activities to the regional commissions and that such decentralization, in its turn, should be carried out on the basis of clearly identified relative advantages.

8. With respect to closer cooperation and a better division of labour between the regional commissions and the Secretariat departments, the related issues have been taken up at the meetings of senior officials instituted by the Secretary-General on a regular basis.

9. An interdepartmental task force was established by the senior officials' meeting in February 1995, which reviewed possible decentralization measures to strengthen the regional commissions and identified the areas for decentralization, which related, inter alia, to the programmes on energy and natural resources, including water and minerals, social development, population, poverty alleviation, economic cooperation among developing countries, statistics, economic analysis and marine affairs. The Secretary-General is keeping the question of improving the division of labour within the Organization in these and other areas under consideration, and the results will be reflected in subsequent programme budgets.

10. Furthermore, steps have also been taken to improve inter-agency cooperation and coordination at the regional level. In his letter of 4 March 1994 addressed to members of the Administrative Committee on Coordination (ACC), the Secretary-General, in his capacity as Chairman of the Administrative Committee on Coordination, proposed modalities to initiate a dialogue on the requirements and conditions for improved coordination at the regional level. The aim of this initiative was to exploit the collective capacity of the system to mobilize regional resources in support of global development, and the existing opportunities for regional approaches and solutions to the development problems addressed by the United Nations system.

11. This initiative of the Secretary-General elicited a positive response from the heads of agencies, as well as from the executive secretaries of the regional commissions. Since March 1994, a number of meetings or "regional ACCs" have been convened by the regional commissions with the participation of organizations and agencies of the United Nations system active in the respective regions. These meetings provide a forum for the harmonization of approaches and the exchange of information and experience on regional level programmes and activities, with a view to facilitating cooperative actions and rationalizing the use of resources.

12. The executive secretaries have proposed comprehensive, all-embracing arrangements for consultations and cooperation at the regional level, to be backed by appropriate institutional structures. They also recommended that, in line with General Assembly resolution 47/199 on the triennial policy review of operational activities for development within the United Nations system, the resident coordinators should maintain close contacts with the regional commissions and regional coordination arrangements in the process of formulating and implementing country strategy notes. With regard to the division of labour and access to resources relating to the regional dimensions of development, the executive secretaries have suggested that these aspects should be discussed within ACC with particular focus on the questions of (a) interrelationship between the regional dimensions of development and national development activities; (b) an assessment of the impact of the Resident Coordinator system on the regional dimension of development, including an appraisal of national execution and the successor arrangements for agency support costs within the framework of regional development activities; and (c) access to resources for funding of regional development activities, including a review of criteria for regional indicative planning figures and their distribution by substantive and geographical priorities.

13. Another proposal concerns the convening of a general discussion on the regional approach, which is promoted by the regional offices of participating agencies, as well as by other regional and subregional groupings. Such a discussion could focus on the following three themes: (a) the distinction between the issues and activities that require a global approach and those which require a regional approach and the interrelationships between the two levels; (b) the specific role of the regional offices of the United Nations agencies and of the regional commissions in the preparation for and the follow-up to global conferences; and (c) the forms of cooperation between the regional offices of United Nations organizations and agencies and other regional or subregional groupings. In the view of the executive secretaries, the main conclusions of such debates, followed by some kind of interregional meetings, could feed into the ongoing reflection on fostering and streamlining of the regional approach within the United Nations system.

14. The Secretary-General believes that these and other recommendations deserve attention and need further study and appropriate consideration by ACC and its subsidiary bodies.

15. As a follow-up to the decision taken at the meeting of senior officials held on 21 and 22 February 1995 to enhance cooperation and coordination of activities between the regional commissions and global programmes, a number of consultations have been held and specific steps have been agreed upon.

16. Thus, for instance, the Secretary-General of the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) and the executive secretaries, following discussions, have agreed to pursue joint programming in areas of common concern, achieve a better division of labour and avoid duplication in their programmes of work. More specifically, the Economic Commission for Europe (ECE) has signed a memorandum of understanding with UNCTAD in the field of science and technology.

17. Likewise, the Administrator of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the executive secretaries of the regional commissions have agreed on a number of areas for cooperation between UNDP and the commissions. The agreement covered four areas: (a) the preparation of the UNDP sixth programming cycle; (b) the establishment of a modus operandi with non-United Nations system partners, including regional development banks; (c) the mobilization of resources to increase the delivery of regional programmes and projects; and (d) collaboration on specific issues on a non-project basis. Follow-up action on each of these areas of work was considered at the meeting of the UNDP/Regional Commissions Task Force in May 1995.

18. The Executive Director of the United Nations Population Fund and the executive secretaries of the regional commissions have discussed the ways and means of bringing about the widest possible collaboration in the follow-up to the International Conference on Population and Development. Arrangements have been worked out for the commissions to participate in the coordinating mechanisms, whereby one regional commission represents all the commissions in the coordinating mechanism set up for the implementation of the Programme of Action of the Conference.

19. Another example of cooperation between United Nations Headquarters and the regional commissions is the establishment of the Management Board for Natural Resources and Energy within the Department for Development Support and Management Services (DDSMS), chaired by the Under-Secretary-General, to review progress in the implementation of the decentralization measures in the field of natural resources and energy. The Board, at its meeting held in February 1995 and attended by the executive secretaries of the regional commissions, discussed the joint projects already elaborated between certain commissions and the Department for Development Support and Management Services which could be launched once technical support services (TSS-1 or TSS-2) allocations become available.

20. At a meeting of the executive secretaries with the Under-Secretary-General, Department for Economic and Social Information and Policy Analysis, discussions have taken place on the Department's proposal to establish centres of excellence in the various regions comprising the Department and the commissions in order to determine a better distribution of labour between their respective programmes.

21. In the context of their active participation in the work of the Commission on Sustainable Development, the regional commissions also closely cooperate with the Task Managers established by the Inter-agency Committee on Sustainable Development notably the Department for Policy Coordination and Sustainable Development in their respective areas of competence. The Commission on Sustainable Development has recognized the importance of the regional approach to the effective follow-up to the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development and called upon the regional commissions to increase their efforts in support of recent national, subregional, regional and interregional initiatives for sustainable development.

22. These are just some of the examples of enhanced collaboration and restructuring and decentralization of activities to the regional commissions indicating the progress being made in line with the proposals contained in the JIU report.

23. As regards the need for a transparent and effective system of accountability and responsibility in the United Nations Secretariat, the Secretary-General, in his annual report on the work of the Organization, has referred to his "management plan", which is designed to create a mission-driven result-oriented Organization, with specific goals of enhanced performance, better productivity and increased cost-effectiveness. The foundation of the management plan is the new system of accountability and responsibility established to create a new management culture, assisting and supporting programme managers in achieving the strategic objectives of the organization and in executing legislative mandates. In effect the new system of accountability and responsibility empowers managers with a freedom to manage: streamlining administrative procedures, introducing considerable decentralization and delegation, allowing greater flexibility in the management of resources and encouraging greater innovation and initiative.